

Montana Academy

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Marion, Montana 59901

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3-11-07

I write in support of SB288 sponsored by Senator Schmidt as it now goes before the house education committee. Generally, I think Senator Schmidt's bill is an excellent piece of legislation and will help create a much needed level of regulation for therapeutic programs in Montana.

It is important to understand that the growth of private residential treatment programs in Montana and the nation that has taken place in the past 15 years is due to a genuine need for long term residential care. The need has not been met by traditional medical models of care due to insurance company's refusal to pay for long term treatment and due to psychiatry relying on the use of medication to solve the problems of many struggling adolescents. Outpatient and wrap around models of care fail to provide the containment, structure, and nurturing needed to resolve adolescent issues of identity and character development.

Private therapeutic schools and programs provide an important resource for desperate parents and at the same time contribute hundreds of well paid professional jobs to the economic base of Montana. Many programs in Montana have a reputation as being among the best in the country. We deserve the support of having a licensure process that adopts standards of care designed to safeguard the interests of children and families and at the same time protects responsible programs from the damage caused by uninformed critics who claim that Montana programs are unregulated and therefore abusive. Such concern and criticism might be aimed at the few programs that are uninformed about nationally recognized standards of ethics and practice, but the criticism indiscriminately falls upon all of us in Montana even though we operate with the highest professional standards.

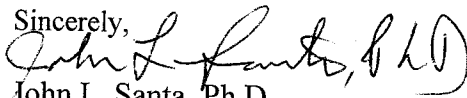
I would also like to point out that the profession of private residential care is an important private industry for Montana creating hundreds of high paying professional jobs and bringing in millions of dollars into the Montana economy. At Montana Academy alone we serve 80 students and employ more than seventy staff with a payroll exceeding two and a half million dollars annually. Our staff includes eight certified teachers, two full time psychiatrists, nine doctoral level therapists, and three masters level therapists. Programs such as ours and the majority of programs in Montana are highly professional and have helped create a much needed new level of care for adolescents who are out of control in their communities. We are not simply schools, and we are not hospitals or residential treatment centers.

While we desire regulation it must be responsive to the needs and diversity of programming that exists in Montana. The new profession of private residential care is not intended to be the old medical model, and regulation must allow for the flexibility of home and open campus settings that are by design not institutional.

We at Montana Academy in concert with virtually all Montana Programs that are members of the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs support responsible licensure. We ask that any small differences that exist between Senator Schmidt's bill and other proposals be resolved in a manner that leads to licensure of programs this year.

We would like one amendment to the proposed bill that would reduce the number of members on the Governor appointed Board from nine to seven members with three chosen from the pool of executive leaders and owners of programs in Montana and the remaining four chosen from the public at large with no more than one of these four being a State employee. Such a board will provide adequate representation for both the public and our programs while ensuring proper oversight and experience to regulate our industry. I would stress that the board appointments should not be determined by lobbyist influence, but should be designed to provide diversity of experience and adequate safeguard for the parents and children who depend on ethical practice in Montana programs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "John L. Santa, Ph.D.", with a circled "D" at the end.

John L. Santa, Ph.D.

CEO Montana Academy

Past President of NATSAP